

FREEDOM AND THE EGOIST; AN ANALYSIS  
OF FREEDOM IN MAX STIRNER'S  
DER EINZIGE UND SEIN EIGENTUM

CENTRE FOR NEWFOUNDLAND STUDIES

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ROBERT S. ROWE, B.A.









FREEDOM AND THE EGOIST; AN ANALYSIS  
OF FREEDOM IN MAX STIRNER'S  
DER EINZIGE UND SEIN EIGENTUM

by

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	PAGE
ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
 CHAPTER 1: <u>THE BACKGROUND</u>	
1.1 Hegelian Freedom .....	5
1.2 The Left-Wing Reaction .....	9
 CHAPTER 2: <u>FIXED IDEAS</u>	
2.1 A Definition .....	15
2.2 Idealism .....	17
2.3 Humanism .....	20
 CHAPTER 3: <u>FREEDOM</u>	
3.1 Freedom as Abstract .....	25
3.2 Anarchistic Freedom .....	36
 CHAPTER 4: <u>OWNNESS</u>	
4.1 Freedom of the Radical Individualist .....	46
4.1.1 psychological detachment .....	48
4.1.2 ownness, power and utility .....	51
4.1.3 indifference to spirituality .....	53
4.2 Ethical Solipsism .....	55
 CHAPTER 5: <u>OWNNESS AND EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM</u>	
5.1 Stirner's Amoralism .....	58
5.2 Existential Freedom .....	60
5.3 Conclusion .....	69
 BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	73

## ABSTRACT

As a philosopher Max Stirner is remembered for only one book, Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum, first published in 1844. In it he portrays the standpoint of an individual dedicated exclusively to his own self-caring agenda. It is a portrayal distinguished by a radical affirmation of individual freedom which is so complete, as to challenge any traditional view of this most complex concept.

The concept of ownness in Stirner's Der Einzige is an extremely difficult one to define. This thesis is an attempt to do as much through a comparative analysis of Stirner's text with several traditional philosophical standpoints.

Chapter one examines the freedom advanced by idealism and humanism to which Stirner was so opposed.

Chapter two discusses Stirner's meaning of a fixed idea, without an understanding of which it would be difficult to proceed in Der Einzige.

Chapters three and four form the main body of the thesis and attempt to describe the distinctions between freedom and ownness. As will be shown, these distinctions have profound ethical implications.

Chapter five compares Stirner's ownness with the atheistic line of existential thought, specifically Jean-Paul

Sartre. While existential freedom most closely resembles the true free existence Stirner calls ownness, we conclude, however, that freedom and ownness are incompatible categories. By Stirner's account, freedom is nothing more than an abstract ideal which ought to be abandoned altogether. Thus, an ambiguity appears in Der Einzige. The question to be resolved is whether ownness is something more than or prior to freedom or just freedom itself by another name.

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## INTRODUCTION

Max Stirner's Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum<sup>1</sup> was part of a transition in the history of philosophy; a transition from a religiously based view of the world to a more secular and critical stance which places everything relative to Man as the agent by whom and for whom the world exists. The early to middle decades of the 19th century were characterized by a rise in individual self-conscious awareness which, through reason and freedom, regards the species Man as the centre and sanction of a world which has meaning only because of Man's existence. It is a short but profoundly important step from this deification of Man to the self-proposed intellectual and personal liberation of the radical individual described in Der Einzige. It is worthy of note that in Der Einzige we find at the very beginning of this transition the most radical expression of this new-found self-conscious and self-reliant standpoint.

In all realms intellectual, spiritual and material there is a latent danger in that what seems to be truthful, noble or useful can be manipulated for destructive as well as constructive purposes. One hardly needs to cite from a litany

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<sup>1</sup>Max Stirner, Der Einzige und Sein Eigentum, translated from the German by Steven T. Byington. Sun City, California: Western World Press, 1982. All subsequent references to this work will be as Der Einzige. Where Byington uses emphasis I will underline.

of examples that history can provide. It is a simple fact that the most profound idea or invention can be, at once, our salvation and curse. Freedom is just such a concept which carries with it the potential for ironic consequences in its misemployment. It is an ideal which has cultivated human dignity, inventiveness and community, yet, underpins a great deal of the divisiveness in our history.

It seems that this is often the result of an abstraction or one-sidedness of thought and action which takes freedom out of the context of the total experience of life. It is argued, therefore, that freedom is not just to be thought of or wished for but is to be expressed in the concrete practical experiences of life. Richard H. Tawney in his essay Man Can Be Free in the Socialist Planned Society, expresses the matter as follows:

There is no such thing as freedom in the abstract, divorced from the realities of a specific time and place. Whatever else it may or may not imply, it involves a power of choice between alternatives - a choice which is real, not merely nominal, between alternatives which exist in fact, not only on paper. It means, in short, the ability to do - or refrain from doing - definite things, at a definite moment, in definite circumstances, or it means nothing at all.<sup>2</sup>

Precisely for the reasons that Richard Tawney articulates, freedom is most often expressed in firm

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<sup>2</sup>In: Freedom: Its History, Nature and Varieties. Robert E. Dewey and James A. Gould, editors. New York: MacMillan, 1970, p. 263.



consitutional terms in which the concrete benefits of freedom accrue to the individual only to the extent they accrue to society as a whole. Accordingly, freedom as a function of political, social and economic principles insists not only on freedom for the individual but a freedom for all distinguished by a spirit of justice and reciprocity. This provokes the question as to what extent freedom of the individual is compromised by the demands of any social collectivity. Indeed, can true individual freedom tolerate any compromise at all or must it be unreserved and unconditional? In other words, to what extent is freedom a function of the self-knowing individual who, as the agent who separates himself from all external restraints and demands, makes of the world whatever he will?

The radical individual that Stirner describes in Der Einzige takes the view that freedom as a religious, political or social ideal necessarily involves some degree of self-renunciation. As such, Stirner's unique one will not countenance any ideal or collective system of values which are not entirely a function of his own choices and self-interests. With respect to duty and self-interest the freedom peculiar to Der Einzige is wholly completed by an unconditional act of self-appropriation in which duty has no role. This is not to say that Stirner's individual would not contribute to some common purpose. But any cooperative communal spirit would

almost certainly disguise his own concealed self-caring agenda.

My concern is neither the divine nor the human, not the true, good, just, free, etc., but solely what is mine, and it is not a general one, but is - unique, as I am unique<sup>3</sup>. Nothing is more to me than myself!

The course of the following remarks attempts to draw out the implications of such a standpoint, and to clarify if possible any ambiguities Der Einzige displays with respect to freedom within Stirner's thoroughgoing egoism. Specifically, Stirner's critique of freedom is so complete that at many points in Der Einzige it seems he is asking us to abandon it altogether in favour of a true free existence he calls ownness. Is ownness, then, something beyond or prior to freedom? Or is it just freedom itself in terms of its real ground or actuality?

The method of exposition will be one of comparative analysis using, in the beginning, idealism in general and humanism in particular as philosophical positions to which Stirner is radically opposed. Der Einzige will then be discussed with respect to its anarchistic and existential themes, two movements of thought to which Stirner has often been linked and which perhaps more closely represent the true free existence he calls ownness.

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<sup>3</sup>Der Einzige, p. 5.

## CHAPTER 1: THE BACKGROUND

### 1.1 Hegelian Freedom

Kant provided the philosophical basis for a new kind of consciousness, a consciousness which places everything relative to itself and for a view of the world as, in a sense, a creation of this consciousness. It is a standpoint which makes everything relative to the subject and in this respect Kant was a man of his time. The Enlightenment period had provoked a process in which the self-conscious individual was to become the centre and sanction of man in the modern world. Man began to take a critical stance toward the old order, an objective order heretofore fixed and inviolable. The scientific spirit of the time encouraged a re-examination of commonly accepted beliefs and practices which up until then were sustained by mythical and spiritual interpretations of reality. Universal principles expressed in moral or religious terms were increasingly regarded as unscientific dogma which neither reflected concrete human existence nor allowed for the new-found sense of freedom characteristic of this period in history.

As the Enlightenment precipitated a new sense of confidence and individual liberty which eroded the old cultural order, just so it presented modern man as the fixed

category by which everything else was to be measured and valued. This period sees the birth of the self-conscious and self-centred individual in radical opposition to all that is non-human. According to Hegel this is precisely the failing of both the Enlightenment and Kant's transcendental standpoint. The holding apart of the categories of subject and object i.e. making self the exclusive reference point from which all progress and truth in human affairs were to be derived, was precisely the abstraction that Hegel inveighed against.

Rather for Hegel, the dialectical process which unfolds in his Philosophy of Mind establishes freedom as essentially a function of thought and by a being whose very nature it is to mediate onesidedness and opposition. It is not at all surprising then that according to Hegel self-consciousness cannot exist in isolation; it is not merely self-apprehending but is entirely contingent upon awareness of the other for its development and fullest expression. In other words, it requires an object in order to differentiate and recognize itself. Hegel said, "The object is my idea: I am aware of the object as mine; and thus in it I am aware of me."<sup>4</sup> However, he quickly cautions that this is only true for self-consciousness at an abstract stage of development where the freedom of self-consciousness is itself a pure abstraction.

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<sup>4</sup>Hegel, Philosophy of Mind. Translated by William Wallace. London: Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 165.

immediate self-consciousness has not yet for its object the I=I, but only the I; therefore, it is free only for us, not for itself, is not as yet aware of its freedom, and contains only the foundation of it,<sup>5</sup> but not yet freedom that is truly actual.

In the process of the development of freedom of self-consciousness the "I" recognizes the opposition and explicit contradiction attending the appearance of another self-conscious being.<sup>6</sup> Hegel then quickly moves to resolve the matter in the following manner.

To overcome this contradiction it is necessary that the two opposed selves should make explicit and should recognize in their existence, in their being-for-another, what they essentially are in themselves or according to their Notion, namely, beings who are not merely natural but free. Only in such a manner is true freedom realized; for since this consists in my identity with the other, I am only truly free when the other is also free and is recognized by me as free.<sup>7</sup>

In the foregoing we have, by Hegel's account, an initial insight into answers to the questions posed at the beginning. Freedom is not solely a function of self-consciousness in its immediacy and hence not simply a matter of choosing in accordance with one's own desires. Rather, it requires the other and can only develop within a spirit of social reciprocity.

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., p. 165.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., p. 171.

This freedom of one in the other unites men in an inward manner, whereas needs and necessity bring them together only externally. Therefore, men must will to find themselves again in one another. But this cannot happen so long as they are imprisoned in their immediacy, in their natural being; for it is just this that excludes them from one another and prevents them from being free in regard to one another.<sup>8</sup>

Hegel calls this standpoint universal self-consciousness, "... the affirmative awareness of self in another self ...",<sup>9</sup> self-consciousness which is free only when expressed within the context of that which is external and opposed to it.

Consequently, for Hegel, the subjective will in isolation is incomplete, an abstract moment in which the rational universal will is limited to the form of a mere collectivity of individual wills. But, in a collectivity of individual wills there is an implicit contradiction which takes the form of duty versus self-interest. This contradiction, for which freedom is an inseparable issue, is reconciled when the subjective will achieves its freedom within the context of an objective will i.e. the state. This is how William J. Brazill presents Hegel's view of the state.

The state was the externalization of the spirit, the institutionalization of divine force in history. The spirit was immanent in history, and the state was the physical representation of that immanence. The state, then - because it was a part of the

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<sup>8</sup>Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid., p. 176.

rational process in which the spirit was to attain freedom and monism - was, for man, the locus of freedom and reason.<sup>10</sup>

The state was the product of reason for without reason there could not be a state. Furthermore, the individual secures his freedom only to the extent he contributes to the state; the true worldly embodiment of morality, reason and freedom.<sup>11</sup> This, along with the underlying issue as to whether the whole historical process was sacred or secular, provoked the left-wing reaction to the Hegelian metaphysic of which Stirner's Der Einzige is the most radical example.

## 1.2 The Left-Wing Reaction

German philosophy during the fifteen year period following Hegel's death in 1831 was, in large measure, an effort to draw out the political, social and religious implications of his thought. It was the view of many that the Hegelian synthesis of the real and the rational did not, in any practical sense, properly address the socio-economic and political unrest which was so characteristic of most European states at that time. Hegelianism was regarded by many as an attempt to preserve a cultural order based on traditional

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<sup>10</sup>William J. Brazill, The Young Hegelians. New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1970, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

Christian values and political authority. Moreover, Hegelianism represented a world of pure philosophic theory which neither reflected concrete historical existence nor promised the fundamental changes in political and societal arrangements which the mood of the time seemed to demand. For those people the real interest lay in the human, not the absolute spirit.

Consequently there was a gradual polarization of philosophic opinion in the German states during the early to middle decades of the nineteenth century. On the one hand were those inclined to reconcile Hegel's absolute idealism with the current religious, political and social structure. On the other was the more liberal view demanding a new set of moral, political and social standards which would properly reflect the attitudes and conditions of an increasingly enlightened and industrialized society. The ideas of these liberals and their implications for society were clearly revolutionary. They became known, appropriately, as the left-wing Hegelians.

Among those who were at the forefront of this movement were David Strauss, Bruno Bauer, Ludwig Feuerbach and Max Stirner. The publication of Das Leben Jesu by David Strauss in 1835 intensified a process of critical analysis of commonly accepted religious practices and beliefs which, heretofore, had supported the political and social order of the time. The point was to expose the gospels as simply a collection of



myths; then all inherent authority which was sanctified by these myths collapses. Concomitantly, in challenging the historical truth of the gospels, Strauss challenged the philosophy of Hegel who was perceived by many as having confirmed the truth of Christianity in a philosophical context.<sup>12</sup>

The course of the religious debate during the period between 1835-1845 illustrates different approaches among the principal radical participants.<sup>13</sup> Whereas Strauss attempted to demythologize the bible he yet retained it's essential ethical principles. However, Bauer denuded Christianity of any value whatsoever, literally or spiritually. For Bauer, no transcendent authority Christian or otherwise, was beyond the ceaseless criticism of the human consciousness. For Feuerbach, true to his Hegelian background, the Christian religion was simply a phase in the development of human self-consciousness. In finding himself man had looked beyond himself, projecting his own idealized self in God. It was now time to reclaim himself, give up the idea of a transcendent being and exercise his own capacity to progress toward an earthly heaven.

Essentially, then, the left-wing Hegelians represented an anti-religious point of view. Eventually their sustained criticism of conventional Christian dogma would contribute to

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<sup>12</sup>Ibid., p. 106.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., p. 63.

the erosion of religion as the basis of society. For the left-wing Hegelians the erosion of Christian dogma opened the floodgates for an entirely new range of questions regarding human freedom and cultural reform. In their view, religious mysticism and abstract philosophical speculation were self-alienating positions which veiled the real issues of concrete existence. Having dismissed the illusion created by religion they could focus on the practical problems of social and political reform which a new sense of individual worth and freedom had created.

Clearly, these thinkers shared the common project of liberating the human intellect from any dogma which sustained the illusion of a transcendent deity. They simply could not reconcile the integrity of the intellect with the mystical elements of Christianity. This was particularly true within the context of current scientific progress, technological innovation, and the transformation of consciousness to an acute awareness of self-worth and individual freedom. In each case they clearly rejected the reality and rulership of an all powerful divine creator in favour of the concrete practical dictates of the human intellect.

For the left-wing Hegelians in general, the goal was a radical reform of the existing political and social structure.<sup>14</sup> Their common strategy was to undermine through

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<sup>14</sup>R.W.K. Paterson, The Nihilistic Egoist. London, New York, Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 27.

criticism the religious foundations which underpinned the existing order. But, with the publication of Der Einzige it became patently clear to his contemporaries that Stirner was not a true partner in their crusade. Stirner was, at once, a co-conspirator and their most trenchant critic.

Stirner, too, rejected the sacred and the self-sacrifice it demanded. But in doing so he goes far beyond the mere rejection of the God of Christianity. He categorically denies not only the abstract claims of apologists for the Christian deity, but also the equally abstract values and principles which his radical colleagues were to rescue from their destruction of traditional Christian theory. Stirner not only wanted to dispense with religion but all overmastering concepts which the individual was required to remain submissive. In short, Stirner's standpoint is not simply the rejection of all obligations and duties, but also the enslaving concepts upon which they may be based i.e., goodness, truth, equity or love.

Put simply, Stirner objected to any and all limitations imposed upon the individual. However, his view of the individual was not as one among many, not as one of an aggregate of individuals; but as "the one" for whom all laws and restrictions imposed were to be regarded with suspicion if not rejected outright. Anything which required the individual to take a submissive stance or required an obligatory loyalty was suspect; be it the God of Christianity, the deity of the

State or the divinity of Man. All social conventions which limited the free exercise of the unique one's appropriation of what is his own were to be counted as nothing more than a reflection of the primacy of the interests of the social collectivity. But, for Stirner, the interests of the social collectivity should be the least of the individual's concerns unless they, coincidentally, served his own purposes.

The freedom implicit in Der Einzige is a radical freedom which seems to reject all conventional thinking on the concept. It will be shown that Stirner dismisses freedom in both its ideal and its humanistic meaning. Indeed the central question to be raised is whether or not Stirner is asking us to abandon freedom altogether. The following attempts to answer this question, taking as its starting point an analysis of what he means by a fixed idea.

## CHAPTER 2: FIXED IDEAS

### 2.1 A Definition

A fixed idea is every thought, belief or tradition to which we give special reverence as a guiding principle in the conduct of our lives. It is a standpoint from which we view the world, those in it, and upon which our actions are based. "What is it, then, that is called a fixed idea? An idea that has subjected the man to itself."<sup>15</sup> As such, a fixed idea is an impediment to the radical individualism Stirner portrays in Der Einzige.

The meaning is clear; an idea that is fixed is immutable and has value in itself, it is more important than the individual in whom it is found. Fixed ideas are part of the spirit world according to Stirner.

Man your head is haunted; you have wheels in your head! You imagine great things, and depict to yourself a whole world of Gods that has an existence for you, a spirit-realm to which you suppose yourself to be called, an ideal that beckons to you. You have a fixed idea!<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup>Der Einzige, p. 43.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

So who is it that holds to these fixed ideas? The religious and the faithful hold to their principles at all costs including and particularly at all costs to themselves. They create a higher order to which they must give themselves over; for self-sacrifice is a dominant theme of the religious.

It is not just the religious in the formal sense with whom Stirner takes issue, but those who would give themselves up to any ideal, to truth, love, humanity or the state. All those who believe in ideas or causes which are characterized by selflessness are essentially religious; in short, almost everyone. From Stirner's standpoint there is hardly any distinction to be made among the intellectual, political or social zealots of his time. All are essentially religious and all are guilty of dispossessing themselves in a most wasteful manner. Stirner makes it quite clear that to give oneself over to a fixed idea is nothing more than an exercise in self-denial. But only a fool would deny himself and Stirner takes time to emphasize this point.

Do not think that I am jesting or speaking figuratively when I regard those persons who cling to the Higher, and (because the vast majority belongs under this head) almost the whole world of men, as veritable fools, fools in a madhouse.<sup>17</sup>

A madhouse; this is how Stirner disdainfully characterizes a world too long occupied with causes i.e., with giving oneself up for one abstract idea or another. But, just

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<sup>17</sup>Ibid., p. 43.

as religion is an example of fixed ideas in general, idealism is nothing more than religion expressed in a philosophic context.

## 2.2 Idealism

Modern philosophy was dominated by philosophical systems which established reason as the unconditional a priori of all knowledge and action. Kant, for example, made reason, however limited, the supreme basis of a moral imperative to which human action in the world is to be conformed. Reason requires of man that he take responsibility for his moral behaviour i.e. that he take responsibility for his freedom. Any conflict between duty and desire was to be resolved beyond the realm of mere sense and always in favour of duty. Freedom is thus directly linked to reason and man's obligation to temper and control his passionate inclinations.

In Hegel, also, there is a direct link between freedom and reason. The whole process of knowing something i.e., the given appearance and the subject's act of apprehending it, belongs to a single relation of reason; a relation between its own subjective and objective forms. Reason, by its own internal logic, proclaims its own being-for-self out of which and through which freedom is possible. It is this same internal logic by which freedom of self-consciousness can develop only in opposition i.e., through the demands for reciprocity of other free self-conscious beings.

In fact the concept of freedom has meaning only in so far as it has this opposition without which, according to Hegel, freedom has no content. Its content is given as a goal to be achieved by the rational subject in an ordered society. But Stirner argues that if reason prevails then mind is raised above us, it becomes something more than us. As such we become captives of the egoism of thought i.e., we become possessed by mind. Accordingly, faith and belief in spirit or mind demands that we give ourselves over to a higher order, abdicate our flesh and blood earthly desires. "But thinking and thoughts are not sacred to me, and I defend my skin against them as against other things."<sup>18</sup> Hence "... if thoughts are free I am their slave."<sup>19</sup> In other words, when thoughts are concretely expressed in the form of a cause or an ideal, they take on a certain authorship of their own in which the individual in whom they are found becomes quite powerless. For example when one is duty bound in favour of some nationalistic ideal, one is quite prepared to give up all self-interests in deference to it.

And what has reason and the Enlightenment brought to the political sphere? According to Stirner a new master, a new fixed idea in the form of the nation state. The French revolution popularized, if not invented, the expression "good citizen". And what is a good citizen? One who gives himself

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<sup>18</sup>Ibid., p. 149.

<sup>19</sup>Ibid., p. 345.



up, who sacrifices himself in the interests of fraternal unity, in the interests of the state. An individual's value under statehood is measured in terms of his value to the state. While the state may represent a free and equal association of individuals, all rights and privileges rest with and are granted at the state's discretion. Therefore the state's goals are self-serving, egoistic; it insists upon a rational order, a moral behavior, a limited freedom.<sup>20</sup>

The political liberty of a state so guided by reason and a moral code must insist on the individual's subjugation to the state i.e., there must be a certain forfeiture of individual freedom. Paradoxically, in the name of freedom, the individual is asked to give it up. Consequently, political freedom does not mean the subject can choose to be stateless; it does not allow the subject's independence from the state, its constitution or its laws. On the contrary, says Stirner, the state is sacred and its exclusive concern is with itself. Therefore only the state is free since it has the power, hence the right according to Stirner, to use all means necessary to insure its continued existence and stability.

Henceforth only the lordship of the state, is admitted; personally no one is any longer the Lord of another. Even at birth the children belong to the state.<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup>Ibid., p. 105.

<sup>21</sup>Ibid., p. 109.

This oppression, under the guise of freedom, is what the French revolution and subsequent political liberalism has foisted upon the solitary individual with whom Stirner identifies. Stirner wanted particularly to expose the thesis of liberal humanism, the standpoint of his radical contemporaries who thought they had overcome philosophy, religion and the state through the idea of freedom. A thesis which Stirner regarded as just one more fixed idea.

### 2.3 Humanism

Feuerbach was a leading figure in the transformation of German idealism and the mystical elements of Christianity into the humanism and philosophy of "praxis" which was to become thematic in subsequent 19th century thought. He railed against idealism as a form of self-alienation, an out of body abstraction which focused on thought but had forgotten that which thinks. Idealism abstracts the human function of reason from its flesh and blood host making reason a self-sustaining, independent entity. Just so, Christianity abstracts ideal versions of human characteristics and projects them into the infinite being of God. But for Feuerbach:

The divine being is nothing else than the human being or, rather, the human nature purified, freed from the limits of the individual man, made objective - i.e., contemplated and revered as another, a distinct being. All the

attributes of the divine nature are,  
therefore, attributes of the human  
nature.<sup>22</sup>

And further:

Consciousness of God is self-  
consciousness, knowledge of God is  
self-knowledge. By his God thou  
knowest the man, and by the man his  
God; the two are identical.<sup>23</sup>

Humanism is, therefore, a resolve to begin with man as the source and sanction of all that is good and creative in the world. Man is the supreme being and the future nothing else but a function of man's practical relationship to nature and his fellow man. Man's life in a religious context is a continual struggle to overcome that which was assigned to him from birth i.e., his original sin. Rather, for Feuerbach, man must reclaim that which was his all along; the freedom to explore and develop his own divine nature and his own immortality; not immortality in the sense of a personal life after death but, through the eternal reason of the species, the immortal spiritual life of humanity.

Here Feuerbach and Stirner part ways in a most abrupt and decisive manner. Contrary to the eternal reason of the species and the fraternal unity of man, Stirner presents the solitary figure of one who faces his mortality with what seems

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<sup>22</sup>Ludwig Feuerbach, The Essence of Christianity. translated from the German by George Elliot. New York: Harper and Row, 1957, p. 14.

<sup>23</sup>Ibid., P. 12.

to be an enthusiastic declaration and acceptance of his "creative nothingness".

All predicates of objects are my statements, my judgements, my-creatures. If they want to tear themselves loose from me and be something for themselves, or actually overawe me, then I have nothing more pressing to do than to take them back into their nothing, into me the creator.<sup>24</sup>

And a little further:

For me there is no truth for nothing is more than I! Not even my essence, not even the essence of Man, is more than I! than I, this "drop in the bucket," this "insignificant man!"<sup>25</sup>

Stirner views Feuerbach's criticism of idealism and his shift from Christianity to humanism as a lateral move at best which provides no essential change in the status of the individual. The individual is still obliged to love, obey and contribute to the social collectivity. The Essence of Christianity offers ample evidence for Stirner's contention that Feuerbach's humanism is profoundly religious and thus anathema to the individual. "Man has his highest being, his God, in himself; not in himself as an individual, but in his essential nature, his species."<sup>26</sup> Clearly Feuerbach has simply framed the old religious order in new terms and expressed the result as a new religion, the religion of

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<sup>24</sup>Der Einzige, p. 337.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., p. 355.

<sup>26</sup>Essence of Christianity, op. cit., appendix 1.

humanism. The absolute is now human nature itself with love as a guiding principle.

Feuerbach, true to his Hegelian roots, gives credit to Christianity as having been a necessary stage in the development of self-consciousness and personality. But it was a transitory stage in which the limits and defects of man are overcome by faith. Rather, for Feuerbach, an objectified divine spirit i.e., the consciousness of God, is nothing more than the consciousness of the species. Humanism, then, remains sacred according to Stirner since:

However human this sacred thing may  
look, though it be the human itself,  
that does not take away its sacredness,  
but at most changes it from an unearthly  
to an earthly sacred thing, from a divine  
one to a human.<sup>27</sup>

Feuerbach, along with his notable contemporaries Strauss and Bauer had started a process of calling the nature of man into question. Idealized human characteristics were reclaimed by the very creature who had given them up in the first place; the creature who, in doing so, had given up his freedom. Implicit in all this is that for Feuerbach freedom involves firstly, a rejection of any ideological and religious control over man and, secondly, a longing to be free from the limits and defects of his individuality.<sup>28</sup> But for Stirner, "A people cannot be free otherwise than at the individual's

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<sup>27</sup>Der Einzige, P. 36.

<sup>28</sup>Essence of Christianity, op. cit., appendix 1.

expense; for it is not the individual that is the main point in this liberty, but the people."<sup>29</sup>

The age of reason and enlightenment while seeming to liberate man's consciousness and reveal his potential freedom, had only succeeded in providing a host of new self-alienating and intransigent ideas which, in fact, limited freedom according to Stirner. To the unique individual these ideas or causes, in whatever form they took, were anathema to the spontaneous dictates of one who refused to give himself up to any entrenched and static idea or cause.

To Stirner, not only were idealism and humanism essentially religious and thus to be rejected, but so was the idea of freedom in whose name they had been advanced also to be rejected as just one more abstraction, another fixed idea.

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<sup>29</sup>Der Einzige, P. 214.

## CHAPTER 3: FREEDOM

### 3.1 Freedom as Abstract

Freedom is a difficult and elusive concept constantly being redefined in the light of changes in man's social and political environment and his perception of himself and nature. In the present time freedom, and the value judgements which invariably attend this concept, is an unavoidable issue which gives unity to a myriad of diverse contemporary problems.<sup>30</sup> The direct roots of the modern inclination to regard all value judgements as somehow a purely personal matter, are traceable to the rise in individual self-conscious awareness and the conviction that freedom and progress were exclusively a matter for human action.

This conviction was to manifest itself in various social and political theories<sup>31</sup> which were to present a peculiarly difficult problem for governments and society alike. The problem was, how best to define and encourage a sense of individual liberty and, at the same time, preserve order and

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<sup>30</sup>For example, abortion, genetic research and environmental issues all, in one way or another, involve value judgements and the extent to which we are free to determine the present and future respecting ourselves, others and nature.

<sup>31</sup>Examples: Humanism (Feuerbach), Anarchism (Proudhon), Socialism (Marx).

purpose in society within a framework of commonly accepted moral and social norms. This is the underlying issue with which the left-wing Hegelians were engaged, albeit on a theoretical level, and out of which their radical views were formed. The entire spectrum of societal relationships to some important degree then, as now, centres on this issue.

The negative approach to the concept of freedom entails the absence of coercion. It describes a condition whereby an individual is not prevented by an external authority from choosing his own course of action. An individual is free to the extent that he is not compelled to act otherwise than he wishes. This is freedom defined in a rather narrow sense and is commonly referred to as "freedom from".

The scope of the definition of freedom can be broadened in at least two significant ways. The first would include the absence of natural conditions which would obstruct the individual from acting as he wishes. In a very real sense this has been a ceaseless goal of man, to bring nature under control i.e., to overcome it. Second, it is argued that freedom is only substantive if an individual has the means actually to achieve that which he desires of his own volition i.e., the power to control his present and future in a positive and dynamic way. Associated with this is an element of spontaneity; action which is initiated for no particular purpose and which may or may not be grounded in some code of ethics: we just simply act in a given way because it occurs



to us to do so. This sense of freedom is referred to as "freedom to", action grounded only in the agent's ability and resources with no particular restraints of conscience.

Freedom, then, to the extent that we do or do not have it can be related to three general issues. The absence of coercive human agents and their institutions, the absence of natural barriers and, the individual's ability and resources to act spontaneously with regard only for the acting agent's desires of the moment.

The degree to which coercion is felt and the response of those subject to it is a function of the political and societal matrix within which it is used. For example, a state in which the press, literature and public assembly are directly controlled by the state, will exhibit a concomitant control over public opinion, education and political opposition. Given that this system is well entrenched there may not be a significant sense of limitation felt by its citizens. Its citizenry may become desensitized by a political and social order which permits the very direct manipulation of daily life in what is called a closed society.

A more subtle kind of coercion, but not necessarily less debilitating, can exist in an open society. This kind of society is sometimes characterized by an inordinant emphasis on the competitive spirit of man. Freedom to compete is a dominant theme motivated by the conviction that freedom and material status are identical. Usually the mechanisms devoted

to influencing public opinion and decision making are highly sophisticated and powerful. These mechanisms are not dedicated exclusively to commercial issues; but may also influence to an extraordinary extent other important decisions of a political and moral nature. The point is that coercion cuts across all political and cultural spheres and is not just a matter of heavy-handed intrusions which limit an individual's freedom.

In so far as freedom requires the absence of coercion, the German revolutionaries of the mid-nineteenth century presented a serious challenge to the old order whose security rested on their powers of coercion. Heretofore, religion had been the basis of moral standards and a reference for man's mode of conduct. Man was to obey or risk retribution as severe as eternal damnation. Religion, therefore, was used as a coercive weapon to control the individual as much in this life as in the promised rewards of the next.

These revolutionaries were determined to be free from the mystical messages of Christianity and its coercive authority. They proposed in its place the self-determining man who, as the centre and sanction of all that is, establishes himself as the sole arbiter of his future and the values upon which that future is to be based. Feuerbach said:

The absolute to Man is his own nature.  
The power of the object over him is  
therefore the power of his own nature.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Essence of Christianity, op. cit., p. 5.

The humanistic project, therefore, consists primarily in a redefinition of freedom outside a traditional religious context. Humanism declares all forms of the supernatural as an abdication of man's own divine potential; the alienation of his creative ability to solve his own problems in the here and now of this earthly experience. Also, humanistic ethics grounds all value judgements solely in human interpersonal relationships. As such, man takes control of his future and the responsibility for the value judgements behind his decisions i.e., he takes responsibility for his freedom. Freedom, so described, is purely a matter for human action and not contingent on any tribal or divine codes.

To Stirner this project is fine so far as it goes but it does not go far enough. He charged that Feuerbach, in holding that the first and highest law must be the love of man to man, retained a basic tenet of Christian ethics. For Stirner this is no more than another fixed idea; men must now revere each other instead of God. No doubt his radical contemporaries were all atheists but atheism does not preclude spiritualism. Neither is morality an exclusive function of theism. Stirner contends that liberal humanism, in general, maintains spirituality and morality in new forms i.e., the state, society, and humanity. These ideals, according to Stirner, maintain that protean hierarchy which history shows has only served to dominate and control the individual and, in so

doing, serve themselves. Stirner's response is categorically clear.

Let me then likewise concern myself for myself, who am equally with God the nothing of all others, who am my all, who am the only one.<sup>33</sup>

Hence, Stirner concludes that the liberal-humanists relegate the status of the individual to that of servant to a higher order. Under the God of Humanity freedom remains an abstraction. The freedom offered is eclipsed by the shadow of its own creator, a partial freedom devoid of content.

Of what use is freedom to you, indeed if it brings in nothing? And if you became free from everything, you would no longer have anything, for freedom is empty of substance.<sup>34</sup>

And further:

To be free is something that I cannot truly will, because I cannot make it, cannot create it: I can only wish it and aspire toward<sup>35</sup> it, for it remains an idea, a spook.

This all points to a fundamental problem. Any kind of collectivist political system has at its root a built-in contradiction i.e., it sets up its own internal opposition. On the one hand there are the individuals who comprise the collectivity and whose freedom as individuals is often a primary goal. On the other is the collectivity itself taken

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<sup>33</sup>Der Einzige, p. 5.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., p. 156.

<sup>35</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

as a whole which wants to organize its members and the totality of its resources towards a single aim or purpose. This is the focus of the conflict which arises when individual interests i.e., self-interests, are sublated in favour of the amalgam proposed, for example, by a socialist society.

The state, especially the form of it proposed by the socialists, represents just that sense of freedom against which Stirner inveighed so vehemently. It represents, in whatever form it may appear, just that stultifying commonality so contrary to Stirner's unique individual. Each citizen may be free to the extent that the state will not permit the capricious action of one individual against another. But, all sanctions reside within the purview of the state; therefore the state controls all coercive authority. Hence, while a constitutionally guaranteed state may give a sense of freedom to the people as a social collectivity, it does so only at the expense of the individual says Stirner.

What is the meaning of the doctrine that we all enjoy "equality of political rights?" Only this --- that the state has no regard for my person, that to it I, like every other, am only a man, without having another significance that commands its deference.<sup>36</sup>

Equality of political rights only means that everyone may partake of all the rights the state has to give so long as the attending conditions are met i.e., all state laws are given

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<sup>36</sup>Ibid., P. 102.

due respect. This is precisely the partial freedom that Stirner viewed as an abstraction because it brings in nothing. Freedom must be complete and unreserved, therefore, it cannot be granted because the moment the gift is accepted the individual must also accept the power and authority of the grantor. To the question of the relationship between freedom and power we shall return.

In any event, social liberty does not necessarily attend political liberty. The issues of class structure, property and the system of distribution of scarce means, all bear upon the extent to which an individual is free within a given political structure. Karl Marx described a society in which each individual has a responsibility to the social collectivity. Inordinate accumulations of wealth contradict this responsibility in that it provokes an economic and social imbalance; as a consequence it creates instability. Therefore socialism imposes an obligation on everyone to acquire to the extent of their needs and on the strength of their labour so long as the overall effect contributes to the progress of society as a whole.

In Stirner's view socialism takes away our distinctiveness as individuals, it makes us homogenous and it makes freedom a function of social and economic principles. Therefore, the humanistic idea of love and the socialistic principle of mutual obligation are precisely the principles of

self-sacrifice which Stirner abhors. This is how he characterized the socialist's outlook.

We are freeborn men, and wherever we look we see ourselves made servants of egoists! Are we then to become egoists too! Heaven forbid! We want rather to make egoists impossible! We want to make them all "ragamuffins"; all of us must have nothing, that "all may have".<sup>37</sup>

And further:

Let us do away with personal property, let everyone be a ragamuffin. Let property be impersonal, let it belong to --- society.<sup>38</sup>

Stirner sees the abrasive intellectual discourse of his time as a struggle between liberal and conservative elements both of whom have the same objective i.e., freedom of spirit. This freedom of spirit is to be achieved in either the city of God or the city of Man but in both cases the spirit reigns supreme. "The spirit remains the absolute lord for both, and their only quarrel is over who shall occupy the hierarchical throne..."<sup>39</sup>

And further, with a tone of finality and detachment respecting this struggle he says:

The best of it is that one can calmly look upon the stir with the certainty that the wild beasts of history will

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<sup>37</sup>Ibid., P. 116.

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., P. 117.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., p. 64.

tear each other to pieces just like  
 those of nature; their putrefying corpses<sup>40</sup>  
 fertilize the ground for --- our crops.

In previous times the watchword was "service". Serve the feudal lord and he will protect you, serve God and He will redeem you, only serve and it will be recorded; put on deposit to your credit. The deeds of your service will be held in trust, only trust and serve. According to Stirner this was the ethic of spiritual freedom. The deserving man, the servant, will be rewarded with freedom, we are not born free we earn it.

In service and obedience to society and the state freedom was, at last, made concrete. Humanity in societal form had at last reclaimed freedom for itself, brought it back down to earth and deposited it in the state for all to partake of in equal measure.

All of which is nothing but a grotesque abstraction, says Stirner. As benign subjects we remain captives of the objective spirit of humanity and the state, two overmastering ideals grounded in the objectivity of thought. However, these ideals exist only in so far as the individual allows them to, and the freedom they offer is concocted, constitutional, it is chartered freedom. The state remains sacred and offers a limited freedom within the framework of its constitutional dictates. In other words, the state reserves an escape clause permitting freedom only to the extent that its own continuance

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<sup>40</sup>Ibid., P. 64.



is not threatened. Stirner makes this very powerful comment with respect to limited or chartered freedom:

In their slyness they know well that given (chartered) freedom is no freedom, since only the freedom one takes for himself, therefore the egoist's freedom, rides with full sails. Donated freedom strikes its sails as soon as there comes a storm.<sup>41</sup>

Stirner is not trying to formulate a new system of intrinsic or constitutional social values upon which to base a new vision of freedom. It becomes increasingly clear that he was not only willing to challenge traditional Christian morality but the validity of morality itself. He contends that freedom is not possible if conditioned by morality by the very fact that morality is a condition. His is a project of overcoming morality itself since, by his view, freedom is undefinable and unlimited. There is no doubt at this point that Stirner has little regard for humanistic and socialistic ideals and the freedom in whose name they were advanced. But the question arises as to whether he is asking us to abandon freedom altogether, not just freedom as a liberal-humanist fixed idea but freedom as such. There is some ambiguity in Der Einzige respecting this issue and it is this that subsequent chapters will address. But first, since Stirner

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<sup>41</sup>Ibid., P. 167. With Stirner's pointed comment here one is immediately reminded of several contemporary examples. The FLQ crisis in Quebec in 1970 is one such case. The declaration of the War Measures Act and the subsequent suspension of commonly accepted liberties, gives some credibility to Stirner's argument.

has often been linked to the anarchist tradition,<sup>42</sup> it might be useful to look at the sense of freedom peculiar to anarchism and see how, if at all, it is compatible with Stirner's radical individualism.

### 3.2 Anarchistic Freedom

The spirit and the mode of all libertarian political and social ideals have not always shown a rigid uniformity of structure and purpose. One such distinctive form of libertarianism is that defined by the anarchist tradition. Anarchism insists on a complete rejection of all forms of authority. It is the one inflexible premise on which there is no compromise and which gives the theory unity within its own variations. This premise, along with an apparent association with some latter day violent extremists, has not served anarchy well in its popularity as a social and political theory. The term is generally used in a pejorative sense but often for the wrong reasons.

A state is the embodiment of government and law with its attending coercive authority. As coercive, the anarchist believes it should not exist if true individual freedom is to be achieved. The anarchists offer in its place the

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<sup>42</sup>Examples: G. Woodcock, V. Basch, B.R. Tucker. (See R.W.K. Paterson, op. cit. pp. 126-144.)

provocative idea of a free association of individuals in a society governed only on the basis of individual mutual consent. The case for a society free from law and government, while still regarded by most as naive and potentially chaotic, has huge implications for the concept of freedom and, therefore, merits some consideration as a intellectually significant social and political theory.

The three main proponents of anarchism in the nineteenth century were Pierre Joseph Proudhon, Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. Their social theory rests on the common ground of a society free of government. The society they envisioned is marked by a voluntary spirit of cooperation among individuals who are rational and have a deep sense of moral values. Anarchists are not anti-social, rather, they are anti-authoritarian. They seek a community in which social order is maintained through reasoned arguments among cooperative and enlightened free individuals. If nothing else anarchism is an optimistic theory of human nature. To expect a group of individuals to coalesce in a society free of any rigidly structured legal system and successfully produce a peaceful and progressive community is, by any account, optimistic.

Among its three major proponents there were some differences in approach to society and the freedom defining its structure. Proudhon proposed a reformation of society committed to a working class fraternity. However, violence was dismissed as a principle in achieving the necessary social

reform. He proposed a cooperative society of independent equals opposed to monopolistic industrial agents and to the principles of private property. Property, in terms of land for example, should be held by a kind of provisional owner whose sole motivation in holding the property was to produce the goods he needed to live. This provisional ownership, firstly, permits the sense of freedom and independence that anarchy demands and, secondly, prevents the possible exploitation of labour by those who might otherwise accumulate huge amounts of wealth.

Bakunin differed from Proudhon in two significant ways. First, he was not averse to using violence in the promotion of his ideas and, second, he was more inclined to believe that the means of production should be publicly owned. This might seem to place him near Marxism on the political spectrum but Bakunin and Marx were polar opposites politically. Marxism advocates proletarian control in the formation of a new state even though this new state should eventually disappear. Bakunin viewed this new state, no matter how transitory, as nothing more than a new political power structure with the same potential for corruption, in new hands.<sup>43</sup>

In contrast to Stirner's anti-social stance, Peter Kropotkin exhorts men to an active participation in society believing, as he did, that only in society was complete self-

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<sup>43</sup>G.P. Maximoff, Bakunin. London: Collier, MacMillan Limited, 1953, p. 224.

development possible. The ethical formula he presents as constituting the necessary condition for a harmonious society which would foster freedom and self-development is as follows: "Without equity there is no justice, and without justice there is no morality."<sup>44</sup> Clearly then, the anarchy which Kropotkin depicts and the sense of freedom so central to it, are conditioned by equity, justice and morality. However, he cautiously tempers his view as follows.

A most important condition which a modern ethical system is bound to satisfy is that it must not fetter individual initiatives, be it for so high a purpose as the welfare of the commonwealth or the species.<sup>45</sup>

In his defense of individual initiative and, concomitantly, his insistence on an ethical code upon which freedom may be cultivated, Kropotkin recognizes the fundamental contradiction which arises out of the concept of communal individuality. His solution to this contradiction is based on a belief in the therapeutic and mediating effects of mutual aid, justice and morality.

It is not so important that the details of an anarchistic social and political system be reviewed here as it is to understand the basic principles which underlie the social arrangement which it proposes; this with a view to contrasting

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<sup>44</sup>Peter Kropotkin, Ethics. Translated by Louis S. Friedland and Joseph R. Piroshnikoff. New York, London: Benjamin Blom, 1968, p. XV.

<sup>45</sup>Ibid., P. 27.

the sense of freedom arising out of their ideas with those of Stirner. There are three general observations that can be made with respect to the social theory of anarchism: 1) it is anti-authoritarian, 2) it is social, promoting individual liberty within a communal setting and, 3) it requires a common sense of values i.e., an ethical code.

Stirner's Der Einzige has been characterized as a case of the individual against society, and so far as this goes there is no doubt that Stirner can justly be placed among the progenitors of anarchistic theory. He, too, looks upon all forms of authority, especially the coercive authority of the state, as the absolute negation of creative individuality.

Political liberty, what are we to understand by that? Perhaps the individual's independence of the state and it's laws? No; on the contrary, the individuals subjection in the state and to the state's laws".<sup>46</sup>

Bakunin is equally remonstrative in declaring:

The state as I have said before is in effect a vast cemetery wherein all the manifestation of individuals and local life are sacrificed, where the interests of the parts constituting the whole die and are buried. It is the altar on which the real liberty and the well-being of peoples are immolated to political grandeur; and the more complete this immolation is, the more perfect is the state.<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>46</sup>Der Einzige, P. 106.

<sup>47</sup>G.P. Maximoff, op. cit., p. 134.

From this there is hardly a question that, as regards their vehement opposition to law and governmental authority, Bakunin and Stirner are kindred spirits. What is common to both is their absolute dedication to self-interest as the principle pre-requisite for a life of individual freedom. It remains a question, though, whether there is room for both Stirner and Bakunin in this society. For indeed, anarchism concedes the value of being social and, consequently, Proudhon, Bakunin and Kropotkin all tried to work out the social implications of a system grounded in radical individual freedom. However, Stirner's world is unprincipled and a-social; he dissolves society when he rejects entirely its moral, social and political demands upon him. "Let us not aspire to community, but to one-sidedness",<sup>48</sup> he says.

The progenitors of anarchistic theories were well aware of the difficulty as to how best to mediate the inevitable discord between radically free individuals who are secondarily committed to a communal arrangement. Without government and a codified system of laws, the question arises as to how order and equity are to be maintained in a society where the dictates of the individual are supreme. It is here that their optimism rescues their political theory. Anarchists such as Proudhon believed that the power of human reason would prevail in matters of dispute. Reasoned arguments would be presented to an agent who committed or was contemplating an act thought

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<sup>48</sup>Der Einzige, p. 311.

to be wrong by the community. Compliance by the agent remains his choice but anarchists were convinced that, subject to the agent's own deliberations, reasoned arguments would prevail.

An analogy to this approach that might be cited is the contemporary use of "moral suasion", a technique used by institutions and governments to solicit voluntary compliance to a request which would benefit society as a whole. There may not be direct retribution for non-compliance but there is a powerful motive to do so in the face of public scrutiny and oblique censorship.

The early anarchists held to an instinctive respect for natural law grounded in the belief that men are basically good. They therefore believed that man's sense of justice and equity would prevail given the right social circumstances. This is an argument cogently presented by R.W.K. Paterson in The Nihilistic Egoist. "Anarchism therefore requires, not a lower, but a infinitely higher standard of ethical conduct from each individual."<sup>49</sup> Paterson feels that the demands for moral self-vigilance arising out of a society of individual self-determining agents would be greater than that expected from a society with a rigid ethical code sustained by coercive forces. "Anarchism thus seeks to replace an artificial and external political unity by a spontaneous and living moral

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<sup>49</sup>Paterson, op. cit., p. 134.



unity."<sup>50</sup> If this is true then all the less would Stirner approve.

We are inclined, if not obliged, to agree with Paterson that Stirner was not an anarchist except in the most narrow sense of the term. In the first place, to be engaged in a campaign for freedom based on a new theory of social justice through communal individuality is, for Stirner, a goal to which he remains completely indifferent. In the second place, the anarchist program places everyone under the auspices of an ideal for which they are to strive; a standpoint from which they are to make themselves over into the ideal i.e., equal, just, benevolent. Anarchism is a freedom to develop, to become something which Stirner looks upon as simply another example of social idealism and that cursed stability which dilutes the vitality of the unique individual. However tolerant an anarchist society may be and no matter to what lengths it went to insure individual liberty, it would seem to fail the requirements of our nineteenth century Thrasymachus.

This leads us back to our earlier question, is Stirner asking us to abandon freedom altogether; if so, in favour of what? The matter remains unclear at this point for he allows the term freedom to stand when he says:

I have no objection to freedom, but  
I wish more than freedom for you:  
you should not merely be rid of what

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<sup>50</sup>Ibid., P. 134.

you do not want; you should not only  
be a "freeman", you should be an  
"owner" too.<sup>51</sup>

And further:

Must we then, because freedom betrays  
itself as a Christian ideal, give it up?  
No, nothing is to be lost, freedom no  
more than the rest; but it is to become  
our own,<sup>52</sup> and in the form of freedom it  
cannot.

While Stirner allows the term freedom to stand he will  
not countenance the idea of freedom and herein lies the  
ambiguity of his position. He says that in ownness nothing is  
to be lost, freedom no more than the rest. Does this mean  
that ownness contains the idea of freedom; or is ownness  
coterminous with freedom, simply freedom by another name?

Ownness includes in itself everything  
own, and brings to honor again what  
Christian language dishonoured. But  
ownness has not any alien standard  
either, as it is not in any sense an  
idea like freedom, morality, humanity,  
and the like: it is only a description  
of the - owner.<sup>53</sup>

It is just because freedom is an idea and nothing more,  
that he presents ownness as something more than or, in some  
sense, prior to freedom. "Ownness ... is my whole being and  
existence, it is I myself."<sup>54</sup> It is to an analysis of the

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<sup>51</sup>Der Einzige, p. 156.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid., P. 157.

<sup>53</sup>Ibid., P. 171.

<sup>54</sup>Ibid., p. 157.

owner and ownness as the individual's whole being and existence that we now turn our attention.

CHAPTER 4: OWNNESS4.1 Freedom of the Radical Individualist

Up to this point Stirner has described freedom as a fixed idea which has prevented the individual from achieving his own finite possibilities. Freedom, according to Stirner, has been presented as a divine reward for service given at the discretion of those who already have it i.e., society, church and state. To what end has freedom been so presented? According to Stirner, it was presented in an effort whether conscious or not, to mollify and control the "first order" principle of our existence; our own self-caring and self-assertive existence. Therefore, the freedom offered by humanity, religion and the politically astute asks the individual to give up what Stirner considers to be his whole being and existence.

Stirner's basic premise is that each thing cares for itself and asserts its own persistence. This standpoint places the individual in a state of opposition to all things he encounters. Stirner says, "... the combat of self-assertion is unavoidable."<sup>55</sup> In saying so he sets the frame of reference for what is to become a radical interpretation of

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<sup>55</sup>Ibid., p. 9.

the relationship between the individual and whatever else exists.

This aggressive caring for self alone which Stirner calls "ownness" is a function of the creative and destructive impulse of self-assertion which arises out of an original and unavoidable state of opposition. Thus it may be said that one is already and originally free, perhaps in the same sense that Sartre said man is condemned to be free. But it is more than this, for freedom is merely an idea, indeed for most, a fixed idea. Ownness, and this is the essential point, is precisely the idea of freedom translated into the actual possession of it.

Humanity claims to have reacquired freedom for the individual, the state claims to protect it for him, and society offers to perfect it in a spirit of order, equity, justice and reciprocity. Stirner will have none of this for he means to abandon the idea of freedom as such in favour of ownness; a purely self-derivative concrete expression of the individual's power and property: a resolute acceptance of the unique one's being-for-self.

I secure my freedom with regard to the world in the degree that I make the world my own, "gain it and take possession of it" for myself, by whatever might, by that of persuasion, of petition, of categorical demand, yes, even by hypocrisy, cheating, etc., for the means that I use, for it are determined by what I am.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>56</sup>Ibid., P. 165.

From this we can observe three distinct issues which characterize the solitary being-for-self portrayed in Der Einzige. First, the unique one exhibits a psychological detachment from everything peripheral to his own existence. Second, his relationship to nature and the material order is such that ownness is equated with the acquisition of property at his discretion and in proportion to his power, for utilitarian purposes. Third, there is a complete indifference to spirituality and any concept of value or an ethical code which would guide his actions.

#### 4.1.1 Psychological Detachment

It was noted earlier that Stirner's unique one is the centre and sanction of a world which exists for his proprietary interests. This concrete I is not the sum of its features; it stands apart from the incidental fact that he is human or German or rational because the unique one is undefinable. He reserves for his judgement the power to create and dissolve all thoughts and objects as his disposition warrants. In doing so he remains distinct from his creatures. They are nothing more than his creations and as their owner he does not allow himself to become transfixed by their existence. To become so would be to give himself up in favour of the object or the idea i.e., to put them ahead of himself. This is the imaginative sleight of mind which

Stirner uses to distance himself from any possibility of an object, thought or feeling having intrinsic value.

Concepts have no intrinsic value, their value is only in their transient usefulness. "Free thinking" i.e., thinking which sets itself above the complete man, is thinking which dominates and displays a pure movement of the inwardness of the merely inward man.

Totally different from this free thinking is own thinking, my thinking, a thinking which does not guide me, but is guided, continued or broken off, by me at my pleasure.<sup>57</sup>

The "I" is the beginning and the end of thinking; "I" engage or disengage the process of thinking at my pleasure and "I" sustain it as long as it serves me well.

Stirner says that the thoughtful i.e., those who put thought first, forget about the individual in whom it arose and only subsequently posit him as being, an extreme abstraction. Just as it seems Stirner wants to abandon the idea of freedom, he wants to abandon the abstract I who is the subject of thought, in favour of the unique one as one who is prior to this abstraction.

Rather than free thinking, says Stirner, the unique one has proprietary thinking. As master of what he thinks, the proprietary thinker can dissolve, change, take back into himself and consume those thoughts which might otherwise cease

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., P. 339.

to be his and thereby take on a vitality and authorship of their own.

The world of the religious and the idealists says Stirner, is precisely a world in which the individual becomes defined by the ideas and values to which he serves. But the unique one, as undefinable, has no value in himself; therefore no standard of value can arise from him except in so far as it is his transient and private value of the moment.

Every thought is nothing more than another possession for "...if thoughts are free I am their slave."<sup>58</sup>

The thought is my own only when I have no misgivings about bringing it in danger of death every moment, when I do not have to fear its loss as a loss for me.<sup>59</sup>

Beginning with thought itself, then, Stirner provides a psychological defense against any concept which has the potential to dominate him, whether the concept manifests itself as an idea such as freedom, loyalty to the state, or pure reason itself.

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<sup>58</sup>Der Einzige., P. 345.

<sup>59</sup>Ibid., P. 342.



#### 4.1.2 Ownness, Power and Utility

The position of detachment which Stirner assumes with respect to his mental properties is likewise the standpoint from which he views nature and the material order. Stirner rejects the notion that property can be held while sheltered and sanctioned by moral principles. An individual should take and hold property to the extent that his power to do so permits. It is fundamental to Stirner's position that property is a function of power and that power and property are central to his description of the owner. Or, perhaps better, ownness is precisely that point at which the idea of having something translates to having it in actuality, freedom no less than anything else.

If you think it over rightly, you  
do not want the freedom to have all  
these fine things, for with this  
freedom you still do not have them;  
you want really to have them, to call  
them yours and possess them as  
your property.<sup>60</sup>

Stirner is fully aware that the standpoint of ownness will necessarily lead to a condition of inequality among those contending for material goods. But for him inequality, and this is an essential point, is the condition necessary for the unique one to stand out, to stand apart from the stultifying homogeneity the humanists called Man. The individual must declare his own sovereignty, take stock of his inventory of strengths, reconnoitre the opposition; for above all else the

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., P. 155.

unique one is in opposition to everything, be they fixed ideas, others, or nature.

As Stirner disassociates himself from concepts which would assign a role for him, just so he removes himself from the position assigned to him by society and the state with respect to his material status. He repudiates their control over his thoughts, deeds, and power to acquire. In fact it is much more than this, for to repudiate and wish for more is to participate in the unending struggle for freedom to which he is so opposed. He resolves, therefore, to become lord and master himself, he accepts his selfishness.

To Stirner, selfishness has been adulterated by Christian morality as the sinful motive to action of a purely sensual man. But selfishness is a sin only when defined by some religious standard. It is, therefore, the deified state, divine humanity and religion itself which marks the egoist as a sinner. Stirner enthusiastically accepts his selfishness as just that motive to action which constitutes the being-for-self he calls ownness. In his own private construct he is neither sinful nor sinless, the unique one is indifferent to such defining categories.

It can be argued that the unique one with power, more or less, to implement his selfish motives, exhibits a distorted sense of freedom based on a capricious will to action and acquisition for its own sake. To interpret Stirner simply as an irrational voluptuary at the mercy of his sensual appetites

would miss his meaning entirely. He makes this quite clear as follows:

But is sensuality then the whole of my ownness? Am I in my own senses when I am given up to sensuality? Do I follow myself, my own determinations, when I follow that? I am my own only when I am master of myself, instead of being mastered either by sensuality or by anything else.<sup>61</sup>

Stirner does not hold the world and its comforts as having any intrinsic value, as being desirable for its own sake. No doubt this is the world of a detached unemotional predator who consumes to the extent that his power to do so permits. But things are desired as a means to an end, an end, it is essential to note, which is wholly complete in its usefulness to the unique one. His motives are purely utilitarian in an egoistic sense, not idealistic.

#### 4.1.3 Indifference to Spirituality

What this detached posture utterly leaves behind is any commitment to a qualitative, moral, or spiritual dimension to the unique one and his relationship to the world. The unique one is absorbed primarily in a relationship with the phenomenal order but this relationship with the outer order begins and ends with its useableness. In Der Einzige there is no inclination for the individual to redeem himself by some fixed spiritual relationship with the world and those in it.

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<sup>61</sup>Ibid., P. 169.

Rather, for Stirner, any kind of commitment to the world necessarily involves some kind of self-renunciation. There is no attempt to escape or avoid his destructive solitude. On the contrary, it is from within a kind of psychological sarcophagus that the unique one stalks the phenomenal order, consuming it and himself i.e., he lives himself out.

Whether what I think and do is  
Christian, what do I care? Whether  
it is human, liberal, humane, what do  
I ask about that? If only it accomplishes  
what I want, if only I satisfy myself  
in it, then overlay it with predicates  
as you will; it is all alike to me.<sup>62</sup>

In his utter disinterest for the ideal i.e. any subject of devotion and self-sacrifice, the unique one also denies the predicates which define and support the subject. Karl Lowith points out that to deny the subject is not necessarily to deny the predicate itself.<sup>63</sup> For example, one can reject the idea of a divine being but accept that which might define or describe this being i.e. infinite love, truth and compassion. But Stirner's rejection of the ideal and the spiritual in all forms is complete and unreserved.

According to this, love is to be the  
good in man, his divineness, that which  
does him honor, his true humanity ...  
consequently, by the transformation  
of the predicate into the subject, the

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<sup>62</sup>Ibid., P. 357.

<sup>63</sup>Karl Lowith, From Hegel to Nietzsche. New York: Doubleday, 1967, p. 336.

Christian essence (and it is the predicate that contains the essence, you know),<sup>64</sup> would only be fixed yet more oppressively.

Stirner not only seeks the dissolution of the spiritual and the essences which define its existence, but the essences themselves. In this he completes an extreme reduction of everything as a function of his own self-will and self-caring agenda.

#### 4.2 Ethical Solipsism

Is it true that the whole human project of developing and defining a system of values i.e., the category of ethics itself, is to a large degree a function of our standpoint respecting freedom? If it is so, the ethical choices we make must be made within the context of their impact on others; a credible ethical system must involve a sense of justice and reciprocity. But in Der Einzige there is no sense of responsibility or consideration for others even though the egoist may appear to act in an altruistic manner. That act may be a disguised form of a purely self-seeking agenda, perhaps to avoid social conflict, gain some advantage or inner satisfaction. Indeed, Stirner denies the whole category of altruism as nothing more than covert self-interest.

But how about that "doing the good for the good's sake" without prospect for reward? As if here too the pay was

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<sup>64</sup>Der Einzige, p. 48.

not contained in the satisfaction  
that it is to afford.<sup>65</sup>

If freedom is the starting point of any ethical system and if Stirner is asking us to abandon freedom as an abstract ideal; it seems to follow that he is likewise asking us to give up entirely the category of ethics in favour of a radical affirmation of our individual egoistic selves.

Egoism does not think of sacrificing anything, giving away anything that it wants; it simply decides, what I want I must have and will procure.<sup>66</sup>

And further:

Take hold, and take what you require!  
With this the war of all against all  
is declared. I alone decide what I  
will have.<sup>67</sup>

With the declaration "I alone decide" Stirner casts his egoism in the mould of the most severe ethical solitude; a solitude in which there is no room for freedom either as an ideal in itself or as a conduit for any social or political ideals.

By Stirner's account in Der Einzige there is little distinction, if any, to be made between ownness and egoism. On several occasions he equates the use of the terms. For example, in discussing the early Christian rejection of heathen morality he says, "... but they did this for the sake of their souls welfare too, therefore out of egoism, or

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., p. 257.

ownness."<sup>68</sup> A little further he says, "And it was by this egoism, this ownness that they got rid of the old world of Gods."<sup>69</sup> Ownness and egoism are identical and Stirner's unique one is the concrete "I" who comes before the abstract "I" defined by the ideal of freedom.

What is left when I have been freed  
from everything that is not I? Only  
I; nothing but I. But freedom has  
nothing to offer this I himself. As  
to what is now to happen further after<sup>70</sup>  
I have become free, freedom is silent.

As further evidence:

Why not choose the I himself as  
beginning, middle, and end? Am  
I not worth more than freedom? ...  
think that over well, and decide  
whether you will place on your banner  
the dream of "freedom" or the resolution  
of "egoism", of "ownness".<sup>71</sup>

Accordingly, Stirner finds it impossible to accept any system which demands his compliance. As an owner he resists the debilitating effects of any ordered system in which, by his terms, he is regarded as merely an object among objects. He therefore refuses to be conscience-bound out of any sense of loyalty or moral obligation.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., p. 163.

## CHAPTER 5: OWNNESS AND EXISTENTIAL FREEDOM

### 5.1 Stirner's Amoralism

It becomes increasingly clear in Der Einzige that the freedom Stirner describes as ownness is incompatible with any traditional standpoint on this most fundamental of human issues. For Stirner, any idea which stands apart from or transcends the individual is nothing more than an external authority which demands the individual's subordination. Rather, ownness demands the collapse of all external authority. For example, the state affirmed as ideal or absolute, is the earthly manifestation of Hegel's absolute spirit and the repository or, perhaps better, the product of reason and freedom. But to avail of this freedom the individual must be a member, must contribute, must comply, and for Stirner this is the apotheosis of unfreedom and self-sacrifice. We have also remarked that the humanistic solution to the problem of freedom which begins with the species Man rather than God or absolute spirit is, according to Stirner, an equally abstract derivation of idealism. Karl Lowith expresses the humanistic conversion of Hegel's realistic content and idealistic form as follows:



With Feuerbach, the exact reverse is true. He is realistic in form, using man as his point of departure, but has nothing to say of the world in which this man lives, and so man remains the same abstract man that was the subject of the philosophy of religion.<sup>72</sup>

Consequently, the particular view of freedom offered by both idealism and humanism gives little respect to the unique individual with whom Stirner identifies.

What, then, is the distinction which makes ownness so essentially different from freedom? We can say that it is not simply a matter of having more freedom i.e. the issue is not a matter of incremental increases since ownness is all, it is the individual's whole being and existence. For Stirner, therefore, the issue is of ontological significance. But it is likewise for any traditional view of freedom; there is an intimate and reciprocal relationship between freedom and all aspects of human culture. As has been said throughout, this is especially so with respect to the relationship between freedom and value. If Stirner abandons the traditional views of freedom in favour of ownness, he must do so in the full knowledge that he challenges, if not undermines, the entire range of the human cultural matrix. Most important of all perhaps is that ownness is indifferent to any system of values.

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<sup>72</sup>Lowith, op. cit., p. 308.

As the author of his own standard of valuation, the unique one prescribes a moral ethos based on absolute self-will, power and egoistic utility. But this is to prescribe no standard of morality at all since it follows that everyone is entitled to take the same standpoint. Everyone can evoke his own egoistic importance and selfishness to the exclusion of the whole of mankind.<sup>73</sup>

It is difficult to resist the conclusion that the egoist's amoral and disinterested posture leaves behind the self who is lost in the spiritual world, the free world, and presents an individual totally absorbed in his own self-caring dominion. Many of the themes described above are, of course, closely related to themes expressed by the atheistic form of existential thought. It is to this we now turn to see how far this line of thought might describe what Stirner has in mind by ownness.

## 5.2 Existential Freedom

When Nietzsche proclaimed the death of God he had only expressed in clear terms what had been underway since Hegel; a movement away from a "world view" which requires absolute trust in a divine agent possessing creative authority. In a sense Hegel prepared the ground for this movement by equating

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<sup>73</sup>J. Laurin, Nietzsche. New York: Haskell House Publishers Ltd., 1973, p. 188.

the object of the religious consciousness with the object of the speculative intellect. This attempt by Hegel to reconcile the finite and the infinite, man and God, was the highest activity of the rational human spirit. But for many who followed Hegel the highest activity of the rational human spirit is just that, a human activity.

The attempted Hegelian mediation of the divine and the human, God and speculative reason, was the first step towards a diminution of the divine and precipitates a view in which freedom is entirely complete in the individual himself. F.C. Copleston expresses the impact of this conflation of the divine and the human as follows.

The antithesis between God and Man is thus diminished or blurred. The abstract idea of God in himself and the abstract idea of man apart from God are reconciled in the concrete concept of world-spirit. The idea of God loses its sharpness and vigour; God is on his way to his death.<sup>74</sup>

With the death of God it is a short step to a vision of the individual as either an instance of the concept of humanity or as unique with no other foundation but himself. As discussed earlier, Stirner would argue that any account of the individual as merely an instance of the concept of humanity remains bound up with theism. Therefore the death of God is also the death of any essentialist concept of Man. Rather, Stirner describes the concrete individual who accepts

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<sup>74</sup>F.C. Copleston, Existentialism and Modern Man. London: Blackfriars Publications, 1953. p. 13.

his finitude, passions, mortality, and sets about a process of self-creation by choosing himself and, therefore, deriving value from himself.<sup>75</sup> This is an existentialist theme which has profound implications for the concept of freedom and its attendant ethical issues.

In existentialism as in perhaps no other movement of philosophical thought the issue of freedom is central. As a philosophy of the individual it presents a sense of freedom viewed from a uniquely personal perspective. But it must be noted that there are many variations on this theme. For example, Kierkegaard attempted to relocate the individual in his relationship to God by underlining the significance of commitment and faith rather than a rationalization of this relationship.

The existing individual who chooses to pursue the objective way enters upon the entire approximation-process by which it is proposed to bring God to light objectively. But this is in all eternity impossible, because God is a subject, and therefore exists<sup>76</sup> only for subjectivity in inwardness.

Alternatively, Nietzsche drew what he considered to be the logical conclusion of an existential dialectic based on atheism; if God does not exist there are no compelling reasons why an individual need be bound by conventional moral

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<sup>75</sup> Der Einzige, p. 315.

<sup>76</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, Concluding Unscientific Postscript, translated by David F. Swenson. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, p. 178.

standards. Rather, men should develop a new understanding of what it means to value something, an understanding which is opposed to ethical institutionalism and its rigid manipulative suppression of the individual's will to power.

But for both the religious and secular views, an important element in an existential dialectic is to realize that we are firstly existing subjects, finite and temporal. As such man is becoming i.e., incomplete. Secondly, in confronting ourselves in isolation we are free to choose what we will become, free to act as soon as we become self-conscious. The question remains as to how we are to act. Are there values upon which this freedom to act is to be based? Or is freedom the first order principle of existence which is itself without foundation and requires no justification?

Jean-Paul Sartre is perhaps the seminal thinker in the existentialist tradition who most earnestly struggles with the question of freedom. Like Nietzsche he depicts a cultural setting in which the death of God is an existential fact and the beginning of self-development in freedom is coincident with a recognition of this fact. Sartre's atheistic program describes a process of self-discovery and freedom founded on the liberating effects of atheism and a self unfettered by a priori rules of conduct. The only rules are those which the individual prescribes for himself and the only values are those legislated by his own self proposed goals. Clearly, for Sartre, freedom is the foundation of any sense of value which

may underlie the choices we make. Concomitantly, freedom is not something we acquire, it is not awarded or added on to us; it is what we are in the most original sense. This is how Sartre portrays the relationship between freedom and values.

Value derives its being from its exigency and not its exigency from its being. It does not deliver itself to a contemplative intuition which would apprehend it as being value and thereby would remove from it its right over my freedom. On the contrary, it can be revealed only to an active freedom which makes it exist as value by the sole fact of recognizing it as such. It follows that my freedom is the unique foundation of values and that nothing, absolutely nothing, justifies me in adopting this or that particular value, this or that particular scale of values. As a being by whom values exist, I am unjustifiable. My freedom is anguished at being the foundation of values while itself without foundation.<sup>77</sup>

Sartre's examination of being distinguishes between the for-itself and the in-itself, conscious man and unconscious objects. Sartre presents a phenomenological account of consciousness in which the for-itself is aware, firstly, of the difference or the gap between itself and the world of objects. Secondly, the for-itself is aware of its own internal nothingness or emptiness. "The internal nothingness actually is ... what constitutes consciousness. Without it, a man would be a solid massif thing incapable of perception or

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<sup>77</sup>Jean-Paul Sartre, Being and Nothingness. Translated by Hazel E. Barnes. New York: Washington Square Press, 1966, p. 76.

self-determination."<sup>78</sup> Nothingness comes into the world through the conscious being i.e. the for-itself, who is its own nothingness.<sup>79</sup> As the conscious being whose essence is yet to be determined, the for-itself is free to fill this emptiness in whatever manner he chooses; herein lies the freedom which cultivates man's possibilities i.e. freedom is the medium by which man is self-determining man.

As an inner structure of consciousness, "Human freedom precedes essence in man and makes it possible; the essence of the human being is suspended in his freedom."<sup>80</sup> Thus, freedom is the for-itself whose choices and values are radically unfounded in any ideal human reality or universal principle other than freedom itself.

As the being through whom values exist, to the extent they exist at all, our freedom is precisely the conscious choice of alternatives and the acceptance of the responsibility which this freedom of choice demands. It is a responsibility accepted in anguish, according to Sartre, since it is impossible to ground our choices in any fixed or first order rules of conduct. Man, for Sartre, is that nothingness whose challenge it is to make the world a coherent reality out of his own conscious choices; not those made by others past or

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<sup>78</sup>Mary Warnock, Existentialism. London: Oxford University Press, 1970, p. 97.

<sup>79</sup>Being and Nothingness, op. cit., p. 57.

<sup>80</sup>Ibid., p. 60.

present, and not those ordained by powers which derive their authority from tribal or divine codes. The for-itself alone is the incorrigible source of its own future. Sartre's man is, in a most profound sense, a man of the future, a man yet to be.

It is very nearly such a perspective that Stirner put forward a full century earlier. Although Stirner would say that nothing can be justified by appealing to "being",<sup>81</sup> there are striking similarities between Stirner and Sartre respecting their ontological positions. For example Sartre says:

The Being by which Nothingness arrives in the world is a being such that in its Being, the Nothingness of its Being is in question. The being by which Nothingness comes to the world must be its own Nothingness.<sup>82</sup>

Stirner seems to anticipate Sartre: "I am all in all, consequently even abstraction or Nothing; I am all and Nothing."<sup>83</sup> Another very obvious similarity appears in Sartre's claim: "Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all."<sup>84</sup> It is no different with Stirner: "Freedom can only

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<sup>81</sup>Der Einzige, p. 341.

<sup>82</sup>Being and Nothingness, p. 57.

<sup>83</sup>Der Einzige, p. 33.

<sup>84</sup>Being and Nothing, p. 569.



be the whole of freedom; a piece of freedom is not freedom."<sup>85</sup> A further evidence that Sartre and Stirner are kindred spirits is Sartre's statement that freedom is not a quality or property of his nature but, "... it is very exactly the stuff of my being."<sup>86</sup> Similarly Stirner says that ownness is his whole being and existence, "... it is I myself."<sup>87</sup>

With these and other remarkably similar positions one might think that Sartre's freedom and Stirner's ownness are equivalent. The intellectual similarities between Sartre and Stirner are unmistakable but there are notable differences, especially with respect to their comportment to the world and those in it.

For example, imagine it is Stirner's unique one who is the furtive figure crouched at the keyhole as Sartre has described.<sup>88</sup> It would seem unlikely that the unique one would be paralysed in shame by the "look" of the other. Shame is not a category for the owner or ownness, shame is a psychological state which is manifestly religious and as such, the unique one would regard the "look" with cool indifference.

A further distinction can be pointed to with respect to Sartre's provocative statement that man is condemned to be free. The existential anguish experienced in view of this

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<sup>85</sup>Der Einzige, p. 160.

<sup>86</sup>Being and Nothingness, p. 566.

<sup>87</sup>Der Einzige, p. 157.

<sup>88</sup>Being and Nothingness, p. 347.

freedom implies a certain morose tone of futility. There is implied a sense of regret that man's project of being i.e. the inclination of the for-itself to become the in-itself, to become solid or "massif" as Sartre has put it, is indeed a useless and futile contradiction.

All creatures, he believes, have, as their deepest instinct, the instinct to fill up holes, and to abolish emptiness wherever they find it. So human beings long to possess the solidity of things. But if they were solid and complete, they would necessarily lose their consciousness. And they do not wish to become unconscious. Thus, what they wish for is a contradiction; they wish to be conscious, and at the same time massif.<sup>89</sup>

Further, Sartre's existentialism seems to have a moral quality to it since each moral agent is conscious of his freedom in anguish. As the unique source of value each moral agent is condemned to decide how he is to act, how he is to use his freedom. There seems to remain in Sartre a moralistic bias whereby the existentially free individual in choosing, chooses on behalf of all mankind. As a man of the future, a man yet to be, there remains the quality of a cause and a truth for all mankind. One can well imagine Stirner's response: you have "...an ideal that beckons to you. You have a fixed idea."<sup>90</sup> In longing for the ideal, an impossible

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<sup>89</sup>Warnock, op. cit., p. 106.

<sup>90</sup>Der Einzige, p. 43.

contradiction, Sartre's man is abandoned in the world; left in freedom to overcome this predicament.

For Stirner this predicament would not be an obstacle to overcome but an opportunity to be exploited in the full knowledge that the ideal in any form is indeed a useless and meaningless goal. He, therefore, unreservedly proclaims the new dominion of the egoist in the most redoubtable terms.

The egoist, turning against the demands and concepts of the present, exercises pitilessly the most measureless -- desecration. Nothing is holy to him.<sup>91</sup>

With this resolve the egoist assures himself instant and continuous gratification, at least psychologically, in his own transient and finite world. This is Stirner's posture of disengaged introspection through ownness or, what amounts to the same thing, his radical egoism.

### 5.3 Conclusion

The unique one refuses to become fixed by any ideal, there is no frame of reference within which he will acquiesce to a system of values or moral entitlement. Rather, the unique one is the point of reference who is profoundly indifferent to any system of values moral or otherwise. But, we may observe, a point is itself an abstraction and it may be that the very charge Stirner directs against freedom as a

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<sup>91</sup>Ibid., p. 184.

liberal-humanist abstraction, can just as easily be turned against the unique one.

The unique one faces the human predicament as characterized by existential freedom with a forthright inner resolve to accept and, indeed, affirm the truth of nihilism. Stirner does not simply look at the world and observe what he takes to be its meaninglessness; that too, but more he is resolved to create and consume it through his radical egoism. We are therefore obliged to take him quite seriously and literally when he says, "All things are nothing to me."<sup>92</sup>

This is not a statement of indifference nor simply the manifestation of a cynical mind. There is simply too much evidence present in Der Einzige that this is a pointed affirmation of the nothingness in which the unique one is the beginning, middle and end. The unique one endorses discontinuity, embraces instability and inequality if they stand to his own advantage. In other words, the unique one's comportment to the world and those in it, is drawn entirely and exclusively from a radically personal truth that absolutely nothing is worthy of diluting his thoroughgoing egoism.

From the foregoing analysis we can say with some confidence that ownness is a function of the self-caring individual who separates himself from all external restraints and makes of the world whatever he will. To adopt the moral

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<sup>92</sup>Ibid., p. 366.

posture of the unique one, which is the absence of any moral posture at all, is to simultaneously abandon the spirit of freedom in any traditional sense. As discussed, even the most libertarian standpoint on freedom cannot fully account for the unique one's self-caring agenda. One is left with very little latitude for interpretation when confronted by one who can say, "Nothing is more to me than myself."<sup>93</sup>

It is a truism to state that existence and freedom in the world is existence and freedom with others. When values are considered to be a by-product of freedom one might challenge this as being purely subjective or perhaps merely relativistic. But Stirner's ownness goes even further, it is an explicit denial of any sense of being-for-others and an equally explicit denial of value altogether. Ownness is a standpoint from which all "opposition vanishes in complete severance or singleness",<sup>94</sup> what Hegel has referred to as the "... pure reflection of the ego into itself..., the unrestricted infinity of absolute abstraction or universality, the pure thought of oneself."<sup>95</sup> Ownness is something beyond good and evil or any conceptual ethical scheme; it is, indeed, something beyond or prior to freedom, but perhaps only in the sense of being its purest abstraction.

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<sup>93</sup>Ibid., p. 5.

<sup>94</sup>Ibid., p. 209.

<sup>95</sup>G.W.F. Hegel, Philosophy of Right. Translated T.M. Knox. London: Oxford University Press, 1971, p. 21.

Finally, if a philosophy of freedom, in any sense of the term, involves a social dimension and is meant to be not only thought of but lived in a spirit of justice and mutual respect, one is not sure how this is at all possible in the world of the unique one and his own.

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